

# Report

# Isle Royale National Park

## ■ 1.0 Site Description

Isle Royale is a roadless island 45 miles long and nine miles wide at its widest point. The national park encompasses a total area of 850 square miles including submerged lands which extend 4.5 miles out into Lake Superior. The Park's history dates back to March 1931 when the Park was authorized by Congress and President Herbert Hoover "to conserve a prime example of North Woods Wilderness." One year later, in April 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Isle Royale National Park. It was subsequently designated part of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1976. Today, over 98 percent of the land in Isle Royale is designated wilderness.

The total park acreage is 571,790.11, of which 539,281.87 acres are federally-owned and 32,508.24 acres are non-federally-owned. The island is only accessible by boat or by plane, and travel on the island is only possible by foot, boat, or floatplane since there are no roads. Mobility impaired visitors can experience the wilderness resource via canoe or kayak. On-demand air service to Isle Royale from Houghton, Michigan, operates late May through late September. The seaplanes flown to Isle Royale accommodate up to five persons. The Isle is "closed" from November 1 to April 15, and offers transportation services from mid-June to Labor Day.

The following information describes the Recreation Fee Program options for Isle Royale. The Daily User Fee is \$4.00 per person per day. Children 11 and under are free. The Optional Individual Season Pass is \$50.00. This pass is valid from April 16 through October 31 of the year indicated. The pass covers the Daily User Fee for the person whose signature appears on the pass. The Optional Season Boat Rider Pass is \$150.00. This pass is valid from April 16 through October 31 of the year indicated. The pass covers the Daily User Fee for all persons on board, when affixed to the private boat.

Visitor centers are located at Rock Harbor and Windigo where interpretive programs and nature walks guided by park rangers are available from June through Labor Day. Fishing charters and scenic boat cruises are available at Rock Harbor through National Park Concessions, Inc. from June through Labor Day.

Figure 1. Isle Royale Area



Figure 2. Isle Royale



## ■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Transportation service options to the Park include the following:

- From Houghton, Michigan, (Ranger III boat):
  - Owned and operated by the NPS
  - One-way Fares: Adults – \$47.00; Children – \$24.00
  - 6½ hours one-way
  - 165-foot, 125-passenger vessel
  - FY 1996 Peak Season Daily Boardings: 248

- FY 1996 Off-Peak Season Daily Boardings: 115
- Annual Boardings: 18,254
- Operating Costs for FY 1996: \$43,445.00
- Service from early June through mid-September to and from Rock Harbor
- From Houghton, Michigan, the Seaplane Service:
  - Concession operated
  - One-way estimated 1998 fare: \$149.00 per person; \$215.00 round trip per person
  - ½ hour one-way
  - On-demand air service
  - FY 1996 Annual Boarding: 878
  - Operating Costs for FY 1996: \$166,919.00
  - Mid-May through September service to Rock Harbor and Windigo
- From Cooper Harbor, Michigan (Isle Royale Queen III):
  - Concession operated
  - One-way Fares: Adults – \$40.00; Children – \$20.00
  - 4½ hours one-way
  - 81-foot, 100-passenger vessel
  - Boarding information not available
  - Operating Costs for FY 1996: \$325,106.00
  - Mid-May through September service to and from Rock Harbor
- From Grand Portage, Minnesota (Voyageur II):
  - Concession operated
  - One-way Adult Fares: from \$29.00 to \$52.00
  - 1¾ hours one-way to Windigo; 6¼ hours one-way to Rock Harbor
  - 63-foot, 48-passenger vessel
  - FY 1996 Annual Boardings (combined with Wenonah route): 5,405
  - Operating Costs for FY 1996 (combined with the Wenonah route): \$312,249.00
  - Mid-May through October service to ports around island
- Grand Portage, Minnesota (Wenonah):
  - Concession operated
  - One-way Fares: Adult – \$32.00; Children – \$16.00
  - 3 hours one-way
  - 65-foot, 149-passenger vessel
  - FY 1996 Annual Boardings (combined with Voyageur II route): 5,405
  - Operating Costs for FY 1996 (combined with the Voyager II route): \$312,249.00
  - June through Labor Day service to and from Windigo
- In Park:
  - Voyageur II shuttle service to selected ports out of Grand Portage, Minnesota;
  - Water charger service or canoe, boat and motor rental from National Park Concessions operated out of Rock Harbor.

The Ranger III boat, which is the only service out of those listed above that is operated by the Park Service, takes in about \$205,000 in revenues, but costs about \$455,000 per year to operate.

The site staff at Isle Royale identified the following issues and concerns:

- The biggest concern currently is dispersing use as it relates to the docks at the island. Some docks are very heavily used and become congested, while others are hardly used at all.
- Another concern is the expense of operating the Ranger III service. The Park Service does charge fares but the income from passenger travel and freight service does not come close to covering the costs of operation. The cost per passenger, based on 1996 operating costs and passenger counts, is \$2.38.
- The expense of regulatory compliance is another concern of the site staff. The Park Service transports the fuel required for running the island and for selling to visitors once they arrive on the island. The expense involved in complying with regulations governing the transport of fuel across the water to the island is a great burden. The staff estimates that it will need to spend approximately \$250,000 this winter in these efforts.
- The parking area at the Houghton, Michigan visitor center becomes particularly crowded with people, cars and boats on the days the Ranger III departs for the island (Tuesdays and Fridays). The Park does not have plans to expand the lot currently. The main constraint in parking expansion plans is the expense. Resource considerations are not a major constraint because the lot is in an urbanized area of downtown Houghton.
- A recreation issue is the threat posed by dense backcountry use conflicts with increased boat activity near the island. Boats docked around the island leave generators running, which creates noise levels that have been found to be objectionable to some users of the backcountry. The General Management Plan calls on the Park to take action if resources are threatened or noise levels become intolerable. Site staff has no plans to take action to limit access to the island or institute any other restrictions at this time because noise levels are not yet to the point of intolerable.

### ■ 3.0 ATS Needs

The NPS has funding needs to run boats on Isle Royale.

Aside from cost considerations, the Park's needs are currently being met by its existing alternative transportation system (ATS).

### ■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Aside from cost considerations, the Park's needs are currently being met by its existing ATS.

## ■ 5.0 Bibliography

Isle Royale National Park. Internet site: <http://www.nps.gov/isro/>. Information printed November 1999.

Isle Royale National Park. *Isle Royale National Park General Management Plan & Environmental Impact Statement, Final*. Keweenaw County, Michigan. 1999.

## ■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Douglas A. Barnard, Superintendent, telephone interview, November 1999